Patterns of Power

The Floor of Force

Warlordism, Collapse, and the Scramble for Belief — from the Roman Republic to the Peace of Westphalia

Thomas J. Bryan

Preface

This study is the inverse of its companions. The genealogies of *Second Nature*, *Nature's Verdict*, and *First Nature*, and the capstone that stands over them, anatomised the managed belief — how a durable order converts its hierarchy into a seeming nature, and how every lasting order grows a priesthood to tend the conversion. This volume turns the structure over and asks what happens when the belief fails. Its answer, traced across eighteen centuries of Western history, is the subject of the whole inquiry: that beneath every durable order lies a floor of bare force, that the managed belief is the robe which hides that floor and makes obedience cheap, and that when the robe is torn the floor stands exposed as *warlordism* — rule by whoever commands armed men, contested by every rival who can do the same, with no settled legitimacy to make succession orderly or obedience free.

Warlordism, the volume argues, is not an aberration but the default — the ground state the world falls back into whenever a legitimating belief loses its grip. It is ruinously expensive, and so it cannot last; but it ends only when a new managed belief is found to cover the floor again, and the recurring figure of the story is the warlord who wins the contest and then re-describes his naked power in the language of legitimacy, ceasing to be a warlord by reaching for a belief that says he never was one. The arc runs from the Roman Republic, through the Augustan fiction and the third-century anarchy, through Diocletian and Constantine and the long post-Roman default, through Christendom and its shattering, to the Peace of Westphalia — which founded the sovereign state on which the modern order, and the modern beliefs the genealogies trace, were later raised. In that sense this volume is their prequel.

Two disciplines govern the argument. It is a structural lens, not a slander: warlordism rarely calls itself by that name, wearing instead the costume of the restored Republic or the true faith or the defence of order, and the volume strips the costume while doing justice to whatever genuine achievement it also clothed. And the belief that re-legitimates is no mere lie — it does real work, and delivers real peace, even as the story it tells is a construct. The floor of force is always there. The belief is what keeps a people from having to live on it.

A Note on This Collaboration

As throughout this series, the spine of the study is Thomas J. Bryan's and the documentary work is the model's, under the same disciplines: the load-bearing history — the date a general first marched on his own city, the wording of a settlement, the toll of a war — is verified against the sources before it is asserted, and the structural claim is tested against the record rather than imposed upon it.

One feature of the method deserves notice, because a thesis this sweeping is especially tempted to flatten its evidence. The volume takes pains to mark where the lens of "warlordism" simplifies — the third-century crisis kept a continuous imperial frame that the fifth-century West did not; the Thirty Years' War carried real confessional conviction and not only naked force; the collapse of Rome was a long transformation and not a single fall — and it concedes that the failure of a belief is always entangled with material shocks, with plague and invasion and fiscal ruin, rather than driving events alone. The pattern is offered as a powerful regularity, not an iron law. As ever, the volume holds its own central thesis the way it asks the reader to hold every claim that an order is permanent: as something tested, not revealed.

The Argument in Twelve Parts

I — The Floor and the Robe. A durable order is a floor of force under a managed belief that makes the force cheap. When the belief fails, the robe comes off and the floor stands exposed as warlordism — the costly, unstable default that persists until a new belief is found. Its recurring figure is the warlord who re-robes himself as the legitimate restorer.

II — The Republic and Its Belief. Republican Rome channelled fierce aristocratic competition through offices and law by the authority of the *mos maiorum* and a web of counterweights — until conquest strained the channel and the killing of the Gracchi signalled the belief losing its hold.

III — Marius, Sulla, and the Sword. The reform of the army bound the soldier to his general rather than the state; Sulla marched on Rome, seized power, loosed the proscriptions — and dressed the first naked seizure in the robe of restoration.

IV — The Warlord in the Toga. Caesar, remembered as a statesman, was structurally a warlord whose power rested on his legions alone; and his assassination could not restore a Republic whose belief was already dead — it only reopened the contest.

V — The Augustan Fiction. The last warlord standing ended a century of civil war by founding a monarchy and calling it the restored Republic, ruling as mere "first citizen" while holding all the legions. A traumatised elite, craving freedom from chaos, was grateful to believe him — and the peace he delivered was real.

VI — The Crisis of the Third Century. After two centuries the Augustan settlement came apart, and the empire fell back onto the bare floor: barracks emperors raised and murdered by their troops, the realm fragmented, the coinage destroyed — fifty years of military anarchy.

VII — Institutions Without Belief. Diocletian stopped the anarchy and rebuilt the machinery of empire, and the institutions held; but his attempt to manufacture a legitimating belief on the old gods failed, and his order, stable in its bones, stayed fragile in its soul.

VIII — The Belief That Took. Constantine reached for the faith Diocletian had crushed, and it held — because Christianity, unlike the local civic cult, was universal, portable, and arrived with its own ready-made interpreter class, fitted to bind a cosmopolitan empire.

IX — The Long Default. In the West the empire collapsed into Germanic warlord-kingdoms, and this time the Roman institutions did not revive. Warlordism, brief between Roman settlements, became the ordinary condition of the West for centuries.

X — Reaching for the Church. The kingdoms re-acquired legitimacy by allying with the one institution that survived the wreck — the Church, which crowned Charlemagne — while Roman law migrated back from the East to refound a durable Christian order.

XI — Thirty Years of Warlordism. The Reformation shattered the single belief of Christendom, and the wars that followed were warlordism returned: mercenary armies that raided when the money ran short, the realm's faith decided by its ruler's sword, a third of Germany dead.

XII — Westphalia and the New Foundation. The Peace of Westphalia ended the warlordism by founding a new belief — the sovereign territorial state — on which the modern order, and the modern warrants the genealogies trace, were raised. And the whole arc delivers one sober lesson: no robe is permanent, and the floor waits beneath every age, including our own.

A Note on Sources

The volume rests on the established historical record of the periods it traverses, drawing on both the ancient and the modern literature and verifying its load-bearing specifics — dates, settlements, and tolls — before asserting them.

The Roman arc. For the fall of the Republic and the Augustan settlement it draws on the ancient tradition (Plutarch, Appian, Cassius Dio, Suetonius, and Augustus's own *Res Gestae* with its claim of the *res publica restituta*) read through modern scholarship; for the Crisis of the Third Century, Diocletian, and Constantine, on the histories of the late empire, the Tetrarchy, the Great Persecution, and the Constantinian settlement, down to the Edict of Milan (313), the Council of Nicaea (325), and the Edict of Thessalonica (380).

The medieval and early-modern arc. For the Western collapse and its aftermath it draws on the scholarship of the post-Roman kingdoms and of late antiquity (including Pirenne's continuity thesis), on the histories of the Frankish-papal alliance and Charlemagne's coronation (800), and on the revival of Roman law through Justinian's *Corpus Juris Civilis* and the Bologna glossators; for the Reformation and its wars, on the histories of the Thirty Years' War, the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (Augsburg, 1555), and the Peace of Westphalia (1648), while noting the scholarly caution that the "Westphalian" turn is in part a later construction.

The lineage. Throughout, the volume stands on this project's own framework — the account of a hierarchy as a floor of force beneath a managed belief, the study of the convergent priesthood that tends such beliefs, and the three genealogies of the modern warrants for which this study is the prequel.

PART I

THE FLOOR AND THE ROBE

The thesis stated plainly — that beneath every durable order lies a floor of bare force, that the managed belief is the robe which hides it, that whatever ruins the order drops it onto that floor as warlordism, and that the warlordism ends only when a belief is found to cover the floor once more

This project has argued throughout that a durable hierarchy is two things laid one upon the other: a floor of force, and a managed belief spread over it. The force is the bedrock — the courts and the soldiers, the freeze and the fleet, the capacity to compel that every order keeps in reserve. The belief is what makes the force affordable. A power that had to compel each act of obedience at the point of a weapon would bankrupt itself in a season; what lets an order last is that most obedience is given freely, by people who hold the arrangement to be right, or lawful, or simply the way the world is, so that the weapon need only be shown to the few who refuse. The companion studies have anatomised the beliefs — how they are built, how they convert a made arrangement into a seeming nature, how every durable order grows a priesthood to tend them. This study turns the structure over and looks instead at the floor: at what an order falls onto when it is ruined, and at what it takes to climb back off.

What lies beneath

The first thing to see is that what an order falls onto is the same in every case, whatever it was that knocked the order down. It falls onto *warlordism* — by which this study means the condition in which power rests on nothing but the command of armed men: where the ruler is whoever can pay and lead soldiers, where his title is contested by every other man who can do the same, where there is no settled principle of legitimacy to make obedience cheap or succession orderly, and where the question of who shall rule is therefore decided, again and again, by the sword. The decisive claim is that warlordism is not a disease an order catches from outside. It is the order's own foundation, the floor that was always there beneath the robe — the substrate, the ground state, what every hierarchy simply *is* once the belief that covered it no longer binds.

This is why the *cause* of a collapse, though it means everything to the people living through it, means surprisingly little to the shape of what follows. An order may be ruined by invasion, by plague, by the exhaustion of its treasury, by a broken succession, by the slow rot of its institutions, or by the fracture of the very belief that once legitimated it — the causes are many, usually tangled together, and this study takes no view that any one of them is primary. What it insists on is only that the destination is single. Whatever breaks the structure, the structure falls to the same floor. The belief's ceasing to bind is, to be sure, the last link in every such chain, since a belief that still held would still be holding up a durable order; but that cessation is as often the *symptom* of some deeper ruin as its cause — the face that fiscal collapse or military defeat or dynastic failure wears as it brings the order down. The point of the inquiry is not to diagnose what broke each order. It is to show that, broken, they all lie on the same ground.

The default, and the way back

Warlordism has one decisive property, and it cuts two ways. It is ruinously expensive — rule by bare force means perpetual civil war, the constant turnover of strongmen, the proscription of rivals, the devastation of the country the armies live off — so that under its misery even the powerful, even the elites who might be expected to relish the open contest, come in time to crave order by almost any means, because the chaos is killing them too. And yet, unbearable as it is, it does not end of its own accord. It is a stable default, a thing that can grind on for generations, because nothing within bare force can generate the legitimacy that would make force cheap; the contest merely reproduces itself, each victor's power as naked and contested as the last man's.

What ends it is the *return* of a belief — and here is the asymmetry that is the true heart of this argument. The loss of a belief is not the thing to watch, for loss can arrive by any road and is half the time only the mask of some other ruin. The thing to watch is the moment when someone, or some group, worn down by the unpayable cost of bare force, arrives at the realisation that what they need is a belief, and reaches for one to cover the floor again — refurbishing the old or fashioning a new, and the new may take quickly, or take centuries, or fail and have to be tried again. Belief, in this story, is not chiefly the thing whose absence explains the fall; its absence can come from anywhere. It is the active ingredient of the *recovery*, the one thing that brings the warlordism to an end. And so the recurring figure of the whole volume is the warlord who wins the long contest and then, to make his victory durable, reaches for a belief and re-describes his naked power in its language — who stops being a warlord, in the eyes of his subjects and of history, by founding the very thing whose absence had let him rise. The orders that endured are precisely the ones that found, or stumbled upon, a belief that worked.

Two cautions must be entered before the history begins, for the argument is a structural lens and not a slander. First, warlordism rarely calls itself by that name; it wears a civilising costume — the defence of the Republic, the true faith, the restoration of order — which is exactly why it so often goes unrecognised, and part of this study's work is to strip the costume and show the structure beneath, while doing full justice to whatever genuine achievement the costume also clothed. Second, the belief that re-legitimates is no mere lie. It does real work; it delivers real peace; the order it founds is a true good even though the story it tells is a construct. The floor of force is always there. The belief is what keeps a people from having to live on it.

PART II

THE REPUBLIC AND ITS BELIEF

Republican Rome as the working model — a durable order resting on a managed belief and a web of counterweights, and the strains that began to pull the belief loose from the force beneath

The Roman Republic is the ideal place to begin, because for the better part of four centuries it was a working example of the thing this project describes: a durable hierarchy resting on a belief so well-installed that naked force almost never had to show itself in the streets of Rome. The belief had a name the Romans themselves used — the *mos maiorum*, the way of the ancestors — and it was a dense, unwritten constitution of custom, precedent, and shared reverence that told every Roman where authority lay and why it should be obeyed. Power was divided and balanced: between the Senate, the magistrates, and the popular assemblies; between paired consuls who could veto each other and held office for a single year; among the rungs of the *cursus honorum*, the ladder of offices up which an ambitious man climbed in his turn. The fierce competition of the Roman aristocracy was real and ceaseless, but it was *channelled* — fought out through elections and offices and the law-courts rather than through private armies — and the channelling was the belief's great achievement. Rome had counterweights the apex did not own, and pressure was released through them as it built.

The strain on the channel

What broke the Republic was not a sudden blow but a slow strain, as the success of Roman arms outgrew the institutions meant to contain Roman ambition. Conquest brought floods of wealth and slaves that hollowed out the small farmers who had filled the legions and anchored the civic order; the gulf between the great families and the dispossessed widened past what the old customs could bridge. When the brothers Gracchus, in the decades after 133 BCE, tried to use the popular assemblies to redistribute land against the will of the Senate, they were met not with counter-argument but with murder — the first time in generations that a Roman political dispute was settled by killing in the city — and the killing was a signal that the channel was failing, that the belief which kept the competition non-violent was losing its hold. The forms of the Republic still stood, and most Romans still revered them; but the distance between the forms and the realities of power was beginning to open, and into that opening the sword would come. The next part follows the man who first drew it.

PART III

MARIUS, SULLA, AND THE RETURN OF THE SWORD

How the reform of the army cut the soldier loose from the state and bound him to his general, and how Sulla marched on Rome and dressed the first naked seizure of power in the robe of restoration

The hinge on which the Republic turned toward warlordism was a reform of the army, and it is worth dwelling on because it shows how the floor of force can shift beneath a belief that still looks intact. Late in the second century the general Gaius Marius, needing soldiers for Rome's wars, opened the legions to the landless poor who had been excluded as having no property to fight for. The change was practical and humane in its way, but its structural consequence was momentous: the new soldier, owning nothing, looked for his reward — land, booty, a pension — not to the state, which offered him none, but to the *general* who could win it for him. The army ceased to be the citizen body in arms and became a clientele, bound by interest and loyalty to its commander. The legions were now, in embryo, private armies wearing public uniforms, and the man who commanded them held a power the constitution had never reckoned with.

The unthinkable act

It was Marius's rival Lucius Cornelius Sulla who first turned that power against the city. In 88 BCE, stripped of a military command by a vote of the assembly, Sulla did the thing no Roman had done: he led his legions against Rome itself, took the city by force, and had his enemies declared outlaws. The taboo, once broken, could not be mended. A civil war followed; Sulla returned victorious in 82 BCE, made himself *dictator* by a law drafted for the purpose, and loosed the *proscriptions* — published lists of the condemned whose killers were paid and whose property was seized — that murdered thousands of Romans, senators and knights among them, in a calculated terror. Here, in full, was warlordism: power seized and held by the army of one man, rivals butchered by name, the constitution suspended. And here, too, was the move this volume will watch recur, for Sulla did not call himself a tyrant. He took the title of dictator in its old republican form, declared that his purpose was to *restore* the Republic, passed laws to strengthen the Senate against the very popular forces he had crushed — and then, astonishingly, laid down his power and retired, as if to prove that the Republic had been mended and not murdered. The robe of restoration was thrown over the naked seizure. It did not hold; the forces Sulla had unleashed were stronger than his settlement; but he had shown the next generation both the act and the costume that hid it.

Part IV

THE WARLORD IN THE TOGA

Julius Caesar, and why the man whom history remembers as a statesman was, in the structure of his power, a warlord — and why his assassination could not restore the order he had broken

Julius Caesar is the figure who proves how completely the civilising costume can hide the warlord, for he is remembered as a statesman, a reformer, a colossus of Western history, and almost never as what, structurally, he was: a general whose power rested on his legions and his money and on nothing else the constitution recognised. His command in Gaul gave him a veteran army loyal to him personally and the plunder to pay it; when the Senate ordered him to give up that army, he refused, and in 49 BCE he led it across the Rubicon, the river marking the boundary of his province, in an act of war against his own state precisely as Sulla had done. The civil war that followed he won; he had himself made dictator, at last *dictator perpetuo*, dictator for life; and the Republic, in any working sense, was over. That the world remembers this as the career of a great man rather than the seizure of a warlord is a measure of how powerfully the toga, the clemency, the reforms, and the sheer scale of the achievement obscure the bare structure of the thing — which was rule by the man with the biggest army.

The failure of the dagger

The assassination of Caesar on the Ides of March, 44 BCE, was the Republic's last reflex, an attempt by men who genuinely believed in the old belief to kill the warlord and restore the channelled order by the simple removal of the man who had broken it. It failed utterly, and the manner of its failure is the deepest lesson of the episode. The conspirators imagined that the Republic was a living thing that Caesar had usurped, so that striking him down would let it spring back. But the Republic's belief was already dead — the channel that turned ambition into office rather than war had already failed — and so the dagger did not restore the old order; it merely removed the single warlord who had imposed a kind of peace, and reopened the contest among all the others. The assassins, as a later historian dryly observed, thought they were liberating Rome and instead drove the last nail into the Republic's coffin. What followed Caesar's death was not the restoration of liberty but a fresh and more terrible round of warlordism, from which a single victor would at last emerge — and that victor would succeed where Sulla had failed, by tailoring the robe of legitimacy to fit a permanent monarchy.

Part V

THE AUGUSTAN FICTION

How the last warlord standing ended a century of civil war by founding a monarchy and calling it the restored Republic, and how the trauma of the elites made them grateful to believe him

The man who ended the long Roman warlordism was Caesar's heir, Octavian, and he reached the throne by the most warlord-like means imaginable. With Antony and Lepidus he formed the Second Triumvirate in 43 BCE and renewed the Sullan terror: their proscriptions killed some three hundred senators and two thousand knights, among them Cicero, whose severed head and hand were nailed up in the Forum where he had spoken. He fought and destroyed his partners and rivals in turn, until at Actium in 31 BCE he stood as the last man with an army, the sole survivor of a contest that had consumed the Roman world for the better part of a century. By every structural measure he was the supreme warlord, master of all the legions, his power founded wholly on force.

The genius of the settlement

What Octavian did next is the masterpiece of the whole pattern, the move all his predecessors had fumbled. In 27 BCE he went before the Senate and *renounced* his powers, handing the state, he said, back to the Senate and the Roman people — and the coinage of the day duly proclaimed the *res publica restituta*, the Republic restored. In gratitude, or in relief, the Senate loaded him with honours and a new name, Augustus, the venerable one, and a new title that was the heart of the fiction: *princeps*, first citizen, a word that claimed he was merely the foremost among equal Romans, holding no more authority than any other magistrate. The reality was the opposite. He had handed back the unarmed provinces and kept for himself the great military commands — Spain, Gaul, Syria — that held the bulk of the legions, so that his control of force was total and his constitutional position a screen drawn across it. As a modern historian neatly puts it, Augustus's signature trick was to pretend that what was happening was not happening: he restored the Republic in word and founded a monarchy in deed, and was careful never to use the words king or dictator, calling himself only the first citizen of the state he now owned.

Why the elites believed

The fiction worked, and it is essential to see *why* it worked, because the reason is the position-logic this project keeps returning to. The Roman elite did not embrace the veiled monarchy out of cowardice or mere calculation; they embraced it because they had lived through a hundred years of warlordism — the marches on the city, the proscriptions, the endless civil wars — and were desperate for it to end. The depth of that desperation is recorded in a single telling episode: when famine and plague struck Rome a few years into the new order, the people did not call for the Republic's restoration; they rioted to demand that Augustus be made *dictator*, even threatening to burn the Senate house, because they believed he alone could save them. The freedom they craved was not the old political liberty but freedom from war, hunger, and chaos. This is the engine that drives the warlord's transformation into a founder: an order traumatised by the bare floor of force will gratefully accept almost any belief that promises to cover it again. And the belief Augustus offered did real work — the Pax Romana, two centuries of relative peace and prosperity across the Mediterranean world, was a genuine good and not a mere illusion. The robe was a fiction; the warmth it gave was real. That double truth — a constructed legitimacy delivering an authentic peace — is the thing the cynic and the apologist both miss, and the thing this study insists upon.

PART VI

THE CRISIS OF THE THIRD CENTURY

How the Augustan settlement, after two centuries, came apart — and the empire fell back through the robe onto the bare floor of barracks emperors, fragmentation, and fifty years of military anarchy

The Augustan belief held for some two hundred years, and then it failed, and the failure is the clearest demonstration in all of Western history of what lies beneath a managed order when the robe is torn. The flaw was in the settlement's heart: Augustus had hidden the truth that the emperor's power rested on the army, but he had not changed it, and once the dynasties faltered and the fiction of senatorial sanction wore thin, the army's role moved from the shadows into the open. The throne came to belong, nakedly, to whoever the legions would back — and the legions backed whoever paid and won.

Military anarchy

The break is conventionally dated to 235, when the soldiers murdered the emperor Severus Alexander and raised in his place Maximinus Thrax, a career officer of common birth with no dynasty, no senatorial standing, and no claim to rule but the loyalty of the troops who had acclaimed him. He was the first of the *barracks emperors*, and the half-century that followed — the Crisis of the Third Century, from 235 to 284 — is warlordism in its purest imperial form. Some twenty-six men were acclaimed emperor in those fifty years; almost all were murdered, most by their own soldiers, who would raise a general for his generosity and kill him when a rival offered more. Rival commanders fought ceaseless civil wars; the frontiers caved under simultaneous invasions; and the empire itself broke apart, a Gallic Empire splitting off in the west and a Palmyrene Empire in the east, so that for a time there was no single Rome at all. The economic order collapsed with the political: to pay the soldiers the emperors debased the silver coinage from half silver to a twentieth in fifty years, igniting a hyperinflation that strangled trade and gutted the towns. This is the metabolic catastrophe that bare force always brings — not merely the killing of the contenders, which is the visible cost, but the collapse of the coordinating order beneath them, which is the far greater one. The managed belief of Augustus was gone, and the floor it had covered for two centuries lay open to the sky.

PART VII

INSTITUTIONS WITHOUT BELIEF

Diocletian, who stopped the anarchy by force and rebuilt the machinery of empire, but whose attempt to manufacture a new legitimating belief failed — and so left the order stable in its bones and fragile in its soul

Out of the chaos came a soldier who ended it, and his reign is the most instructive in the volume, because it separates with unusual clarity the two things a durable order requires — working institutions and a believed legitimacy — and shows that you can supply the first without the second. Diocletian, who took power in 284, was a brilliant administrator, and he rebuilt the machinery of the Roman state from the ground up. He divided the unwieldy empire among four rulers, the Tetrarchy of 293, to share the burden of defence and to provide for orderly succession; he doubled the number of provinces and grouped them under a new tier of officials; he restructured the army and the taxation that fed it; he expanded the bureaucracy into something recognisably a modern state. These institutional reforms were a genuine and lasting achievement — they held, in their essentials, and gave the empire another century and more of life.

The belief that would not take

But Diocletian understood that machinery alone was not enough, that the order needed a believed foundation as well, and his attempt to supply one failed — and the failure is as instructive as the reforms' success. He tried to refound legitimacy on the old religion and the sacralised person of the emperor: he took the name Jovius, associating himself with Jupiter, ruled with a remote and god-like ceremony, was hailed on his coins as *dominus et deus*, lord and god, and in 303 he launched the Great Persecution, the most savage of all Roman assaults on the Christians, ordering churches razed and scriptures burned and death for any who would not sacrifice to the Roman gods. The persecution was an attempt to compel the empire back into a single, traditional, emperor-crowned cult that would bind it as the old civic religion once had. It did not take. Christianity could no longer be uprooted; the old gods could no longer command the general assent that legitimacy requires; and when Diocletian did the unprecedented thing of voluntarily abdicating in 305, his elaborate succession machinery, lacking any believed foundation of its own, promptly collapsed into a fresh round of civil war among the men who had inherited his offices. The lesson stands as a warning to every builder of orders: institutions can stabilise the body of a state, but without a belief that takes, the state has no soul, and a body without a soul does not stay standing for long. The man who would supply the soul came out of the very civil war Diocletian's failure had reopened.

PART VIII

THE BELIEF THAT TOOK

Constantine, who won the renewed wars and reached for a new legitimating faith — and why Christianity, which Diocletian's revived paganism could not match, took hold and held the empire together

Constantine won the wars that followed Diocletian's abdication, and in doing so he reached for the belief his predecessor had tried to crush, and it was the reaching that made the difference. Before the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, which gave him the Western empire, he is said to have seen a sign in the heavens and conquered under it; whatever the truth of the vision, which his own propagandists shaped after the fact, the decision it dramatises was real. In 313, by the Edict of Milan, he ended the persecution and made the empire neutral toward the Christian faith; thereafter he became the Church's patron, summoning in 325 the Council of Nicaea to hammer the scattered congregations into a single empire-wide orthodoxy with one creed, and founding a new Christian capital, Constantinople, to anchor the reoriented order. By 380, under Theodosius, Nicene Christianity was the official religion of the Roman state.

Why this belief and not the other

The decisive question is why Christianity took hold where Diocletian's revived paganism could not, and the answer reveals what a legitimating belief actually requires. The old civic religion was *local* — a matter of particular cities and their particular gods, bound to place and custom, incapable of binding a cosmopolitan empire of a hundred peoples into one. Christianity was its structural opposite: *universal*, addressed to all peoples without distinction; *portable*, carried in conviction rather than fixed to a temple; intensely committed, demanding and receiving a devotion the civic cults never asked; and, decisively, it arrived with its own ready-made interpreter class and organisation — the bishops, the councils, the creed, a trans-imperial Church that was a legitimating apparatus already built and waiting to be adopted. Constantine did not have to manufacture a priesthood, as Diocletian had tried and failed to do; he had only to ally with one that already existed and already commanded belief. This is why the new robe held when the refurbished old one had not: it fitted the shape of the empire it had to cover, and it brought its own tailors. The belief took, and on it the Roman order — in the East, where it would endure another thousand years — was refounded. But in the West the floor was about to open again, and stay open far longer than before.

PART IX

THE LONG DEFAULT

The collapse of the Western Empire into Germanic warlord-kingdoms, and why, this time, the Roman institutions did not revive — so that the bare floor of force became the ordinary condition of the West for centuries

In the West the fifth century brought not another crisis from which the empire recovered but a collapse from which, as an imperial order, it did not. The legions could no longer be paid or recruited; the frontiers dissolved; Rome itself was sacked, in 410 and again in 455; and in 476 a Germanic commander, Odoacer, deposed the last Western emperor, a boy named Romulus Augustulus, and did not trouble to replace him, sending the imperial insignia east to Constantinople as if to say the office was now vacant in the West for good. Across the former provinces the Germanic warlords carved out kingdoms — Ostrogoths in Italy, Visigoths in Spain and Gaul, Vandals in Africa, Franks in the north — and these kings ruled, in the main, as warlords always rule: by the loyalty of armed followers and the personal bond of the war-band, not by a settled, impersonal legitimacy binding a wide and orderly state.

Warlordism as the ordinary condition

The point this study presses is that the Roman *institutions did not revive* — and that this distinguishes the Western collapse from every Roman crisis before it. The third-century anarchy had been ended by a Diocletian who rebuilt the machinery; the assassination of an emperor had always been followed by another emperor and the same apparatus of empire. But in the post-Roman West there was no apparatus to inherit; the tax system, the professional army, the salaried bureaucracy, the rule of written law over a wide territory — the whole metabolism of the ancient state — decayed and in many places vanished, and what replaced it was the local and the personal: the strong man in his hall, the war-band, the bond of lord and follower. (The transformation was slower and less total than the old image of a sudden "fall" suggests — Roman culture, language, and law persisted in fragments, and historians rightly speak of a long late antiquity rather than a single catastrophe — but the central political fact is not in doubt: the wide, impersonal, institution-bearing order was gone.) Warlordism, which in the Roman story had been the brief and violent interval between settled orders, now became in the West the *ordinary condition*, the default that lasted not for fifty years but for centuries. The West would climb out of it eventually, but it would climb out only by reaching, as Constantine had reached, for the one legitimating institution that had survived the wreck.

PART X

REACHING FOR THE CHURCH

How the warlord-kingdoms of the West slowly re-acquired legitimacy by allying with the Roman Church, and how Roman law itself migrated back from the East to refound a durable Christian order

The institution that survived the wreck of Rome in the West was the Church, and it was by reaching for the Church that the warlord-kingdoms slowly turned themselves into something more durable than war-bands. The Church had outlived the empire that birthed it; its bishops had taken over civic functions as the imperial officials withdrew, its structure of dioceses still mapped the old order, and its claim to interpret the will of God gave it a legitimating authority no warlord could manufacture for himself. The kings, seeing this, sought its blessing. The Frankish warlord Clovis converted to Catholic Christianity around the turn of the sixth century, and the conversion was at once a genuine faith and a shrewd act of legitimation, for it won him the allegiance of the Gallo-Roman population and let him appear as a rightful ruler rather than a foreign conqueror. The pattern deepened over the following centuries into a full alliance between the Frankish kings and the papacy, and it reached its emblem on Christmas Day of the year 800, when Pope Leo III placed a crown on the head of the Frankish king Charlemagne and declared him Roman Emperor — a warlord-king re-robed, by the one institution that could still confer it, in the borrowed majesty of Rome.

The migration of the law

The robe, though, was not the old Roman order revived; it was the imperial title and the Church's sanction laid over a Frankish reality, "a revival of the title but not of the institutions," as the historians carefully say. The institutions came back more slowly, and by a remarkable route. The great body of Roman law had been gathered and codified not in the fallen West but in the surviving East, where the emperor Justinian had his jurists compile the *Corpus Juris Civilis* in the 530s; and it was this Eastern codification that, rediscovered in Italy and expounded by Irnerius and the glossators of Bologna from the late eleventh century, flooded back into the medieval West and gave its kingdoms and its Church a sophisticated apparatus of law to govern by. So the West rebuilt a durable order out of three salvaged materials — the surviving Church for legitimacy, the borrowed imperial title for dignity, and the migrated Roman law for administration — and on that foundation the long stability of medieval Christendom was raised: the believed cosmos of the Great Chain, the divine right of kings, the interpreting priesthood of the clergy, the whole managed belief whose anatomy the companion study has drawn. The floor of force had at last been covered again, and the covering held for the better part of half a millennium — until a monk in Saxony tore it.

PART XI

THIRTY YEARS OF WARLORDISM

How the Reformation shattered the single belief of Christendom, and how the wars that followed — the Thirty Years' War above all — were warlordism returned, fought by mercenary armies under confessional names

The managed belief of medieval Christendom rested on a single, unfractured Church, the one institution authorised to interpret the will of God for all of Western Europe; and when that unity broke, the floor opened once more. Martin Luther's revolt of 1517, and the Reformation it loosed, did not merely add new doctrines — it shattered the *singleness* of the legitimating belief, splitting Western Christianity into rival confessions, each certain, each armed, each denying the others' authority to interpret the sacred order at all. Where there had been one priesthood pronouncing one cosmos, there were now several, anathematising one another; and an order whose legitimacy depends on a single believed interpretation cannot survive its fracture into many. What followed, across more than a century of religious war, was the bare floor laid open again.

The mercenaries and the realm's religion

The Thirty Years' War, from 1618 to 1648, was the catastrophe in which this is seen most plainly, and the structural description of it reads exactly like warlordism because that is what it was. The German lands were nominally an empire but in fact a patchwork of hundreds of princes, none of whom — in the precise words of one modern analysis — possessed a monopoly of force in his own territory or could raise a professional army by systematic taxation; instead their wars were fought by *mercenaries* hired on borrowed money, and when the money ran short the mercenaries turned to raiding and looting the country they marched through. Great military entrepreneurs like Wallenstein raised private armies tens of thousands strong and rented them to whoever could pay, switching the fate of provinces by the movement of forces loyal to no state. The devastation was on a scale Europe had not seen since the fall of Rome — whole regions of Germany lost a third or more of their people to the sword, to the famine the armies brought, and to the plague that followed them. The principle that governed the killing had been named at the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 — *cuius regio, eius religio*, whose realm, his religion — and it is the perfect epitaph for a collapsed belief: when there is no longer a single shared faith to legitimate the order, the ruler's sword simply decides which faith his subjects shall profess. And as always, the long agony bred in the survivors, princes and peoples alike, the old desperate position-logic: an end to the chaos, on almost any terms.

PART XII

WESTPHALIA AND THE NEW FOUNDATION

How the Peace of Westphalia ended the warlordism by founding a new belief — the sovereign territorial state — on which the modern order was built, and what the whole arc tells us about the floor that is always there

The Thirty Years' War ended, as these intervals of warlordism always end, with the founding of a new belief that could re-legitimate a settled order — and the belief founded at the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 is the one the modern world still substantially inhabits. The treaties, signed in the Westphalian towns of Münster and Osnabrück, did not restore the shattered unity of Christendom; that was beyond saving, and the genius of the settlement was to stop trying. Instead it founded order on a new principle altogether: the *sovereign territorial state*, supreme and final within its own borders, owing no obedience to any universal authority above it, entitled to determine its own affairs — and its own religion — free of outside interference, and equal in law to every other such state. Order would no longer rest on one shared faith binding all of Europe, because that faith had proved unrestorable and the attempt to restore it by force had nearly destroyed the continent; it would rest instead on a system of bounded sovereignties, each keeping its own house, coexisting through a balance of power and a law of nations rather than a common creed.

The prequel, and the floor that remains

This is where the present study hands off to the others, for the sovereign state founded at Westphalia is the very thing whose later legitimating beliefs the companion genealogies trace. The bare principle of sovereignty was only the beginning; the modern state would go on to clothe itself, as every durable order must, in a managed belief that made its hierarchy seem natural and its obedience cheap — first the divine right of its kings, then the sovereignty of its nation, and at last the great modern warrants the genealogies anatomise, the economic and the biological and the racial naturalisations by which the inequalities of the modern order were made to look like laws of nature rather than the works of men. Westphalia is the floor on which that whole modern edifice of belief was raised; this volume has been its prequel, the story of the collapses and refoundations out of which the modern state at last emerged.

And the arc, seen whole, delivers a single sober lesson, which is the thesis with which the volume began. Beneath every durable order — the Republic, the Augustan peace, Christendom, the Westphalian states — there lies the same floor of bare force, and over it the same kind of covering, a managed belief that hides the force and makes obedience cheap. The orders that lasted were the ones that found, or stumbled upon, a belief that took; and each in its turn, when its belief at last failed, fell back through the torn robe onto the floor, into the warlordism that is the human default — the barracks emperors, the Germanic war-bands, the mercenary armies of the Thirty Years' War — and stayed there, in misery, until a new belief was found to cover the floor again. The beliefs the modern genealogies examine are the latest such covering, the newest robe thrown over the oldest floor. They have held, with revisions, for some centuries now. But the lesson of the whole long arc is that no robe is permanent, that every managed belief is in the end a human construction laid over a human capacity for force, and that the floor — patient, impersonal, always there — waits beneath the order of every age, including our own, for the day the robe wears thin.